

The Storming of the Bastille

- Bastille was originally constructed in 1370 as a fortification to protect the walled city of Paris from English attack.
- The Bastille was first used as a state prison in the 17th century, and its cells were reserved for upper-class felons, political troublemakers, and spies.
- Most prisoners there were imprisoned without a trial under direct orders of the king.
- The fort stood 100 feet tall and was surrounded by a moat more than 80 feet wide.
- By the summer of 1789, France was moving quickly toward revolution. There were severe food shortages in France that year, and popular resentment against the rule of King Louis XVI was turning to fury.
- In June, the Third Estate, which represented commoners and the lower clergy, declared itself the National Assembly and called for the drafting of the constitution. At first, Louis legalized the National Assembly but then surrounded Paris with troops. He also dismissed Jacques Necker, who was a popular minister of state who had supported reforms.
 - In response, mobs began rioting in Paris at the instigation of revolutionary leaders.
- The military governor of the Bastille, Bernard-Rene Jordan de Launay, feared that his fortress would be a target for the revolutionaries and so requested reinforcements.
- A company of Swiss mercenary soldiers arrived on July 7 to bolster his garrison of 82 soldiers.
- On July 12, royal authorities transferred 250 barrels of gunpowder to the Bastille from the Paris Arsenal, which was more vulnerable to attack. Launay brought his men into the Bastille and raised its two drawbridges.
- On July 13, revolutionaries with muskets began firing at soldiers standing guard on the Bastille's towers and then took cover in the courtyard. That evening, mobs stormed the Paris Arsenal and another armory, acquiring thousands of muskets.
- At dawn on July 14, a great crowd armed with muskets, swords, and various makeshift weapons began to gather around Bastille.
- Launay received a delegation of revolutionary leaders but refused to surrender the fortress and its weapons as requested. He later received a second delegation and promised he would not open fire on the crowd. To prove he was being truthful, he showed them that his cannons were not loaded.
 - Instead of calming the agitated crowd, news of the unloaded cannons emboldened a group of men to climb over the outer wall of the courtyard and lower a drawbridge.
- Three hundred revolutionaries rushed in, and Launay's men took up a defensive position. When the mob outside began trying to lower the second drawbridge, he ordered his men to open fire.
 - One hundred rioters were killed or wounded
- Launay's men were able to hold the mob back, but more and more rioters were converging on the Bastille. In the afternoon, a company of deserters from the French army arrived.
- The soldiers, hidden by smoke from fires set by the mob, dragged five cannons into the courtyard and aimed them at the Bastille. Eventually, Launay raised a white flag of surrender over the fortress.
- Launay and his men were taken into custody, the gunpowder and cannons were seized, and the seven prisoners of the Bastille were freed. Upon arriving at the Hotel de Ville, where Launay was to be arrested by a Revolutionary Council, the governor was pulled away from his escort by a mob and murdered.
- The capture of Bastille symbolized the end of the "old regime" and provided the French Revolutionary cause with an irresistible momentum. Joined by 4/5 of the French army, the revolutionaries seized control of Paris and then the French countryside, forcing King Louis XVI to accept a constitutional government.
- In 1792, the monarchy was abolished and Louis and his wife Marie Antoinette were sent to the guillotine for treason in 1793.
- By order of the new revolutionary government, the Bastille was torn down. On February 6, 1790, the last stone of the hated prison-fortress was presented to the National Assembly.
- Today, July 14 – Bastille Day – is celebrated as a national holiday in France.